

## TEACHING SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS AT THE POST-SECONDARY LEVEL

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### ABSTRACT

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has gained increasing importance in language studies as well as language education. In particular, the Hallidayan school has received increased academic attention in Hong Kong at both universities and community colleges. Drawing on the experience of the author's capacity as the syllabus writer of a subject Analysis of English Grammar (AEG), which is based on SFL, as well as subject leader of the course at Hong Kong Community College (HKCC), this paper aims to discuss practical issues in, and reflect on the value of, teaching SFL to students at the post-secondary level. By issues, it means decision on contents to be included in the syllabus, textbook and reference book selection, breadth and depth of contents to be taught in classroom, teaching schedule and actual progress in the classroom. For value, the extents to which students have achieved expected learning outcomes as stipulated on the teaching plan serve as a main indicator, which will be further supplemented with a focus-group interview with past students.

**KEYWORDS:** Systemic Functional Linguistics, Post-Secondary Education, Functional Grammar

### INTRODUCTION

The last some forty years has seen the foundation of Functional Grammar by M.A.K. Halliday (1985) and its development into a distinct school of linguistics as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Butler, 2013). SFL has found its applications in all aspects in language studies and even in other disciplines (Matthiessen, 2013; Coffin, 2013; O'Halloran, Marissa, Podlasov, & Tan, 2013). With such breadth and depth, SFL is being taught at various levels (ENGL2006.pdf, 2012; CITY UNIVERSITY, 2012). The present study is a result of teaching SFL at the post-secondary and pre-university level (to be specific, associate degree level similar to the college system in the US). In the rest of this introductory section, a very brief overview of SFL and the background of the subject of interest that teaches SFL are provided.

### Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Considering limited space here, any attempt to summarize such a vast and rapidly growing linguistic discipline as SFL is doomed to futility. However, an overview of key concepts in the Hallidean school which are highly relevant to the present study (i.e. SFL at the clause level) is in place. These include constituency of the clause (maximal bracketing), interpersonal metafunction (viewing the clause as exchange among participants in communication), experiential metafunction (aka. ideational metafunction, looking at the clause as representation of real world experience), textual metafunction (clause as a unit in creating texture), logical metafunction (clauses in combination), cohesion (reference and ellipsis), and grammatical metaphor (lexicogrammatical structures used to perform an unintended function) (Halliday, 1994).

## **Analysis of English Grammar**

The subject on SFL offered at the community college taught by the author is titled Analysis of English Grammar. It replaces another course on English grammar in response to graduates' inquiry about SFL, which has not been taught previously. In response to this, AEG is made compulsory for two language-related programmes (Associate Degree in English for Business Communication and Associate Degree in Bilingual Communication) and discipline-specific elective for another one (Associate Degree in Translation and Interpretation). The offer of the subject began in the academic year of 2012-2013, with a total enrollment of 215 students.

## **Curriculum Design and Choice of Textbook**

Halliday has already laid a clear framework of SFL with the three metafunctions, providing a fundamental model for courses on SFL at different levels. At AD level, there is often strong interdependence between curriculum design and choice of textbook. Many coursebooks on SFL have been available since the publication of An Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG) (Halliday, 1985), featuring different depths, breadths, and orders of presentation of the three metafunctions (Butt, 2012; Fontaine, 2012; Thompson, 2014). The comprehensiveness of IFG is unmatched by any existing textbooks on SFL, but the depth and breadth would have posed SFL as a difficult, if not unmanageable, subject for post-secondary students, in particular, those going into the AD level. On the other hand, Thompson's Introducing Functional Grammar (IngFG) provides a relatively simple yet comprehensive elaboration of SFL at the clause level, leaving the application of SFL at the phrase and group levels to those interested to pursue further from IFG or other SFL textbooks. This has made IngFG a more appropriate choice for the subject textbook for AEG.

Like any other linguistics disciplines, since SFL has a rather fixed framework, the indicative content of the syllabus of AEG follows the common core aspects (i.e. approaches to grammar, overview of SFL, constituency, experiential metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, textual metafunction, logical metafunction, grammatical metaphor, and application of SFL), with reference to IngFG as the textbook of AEG. The challenge, however, is like Theme and Rheme: which should be chosen as the point of departure in the teaching schedule?

## **MAIN BODY**

### **Teaching Schedule**

IngFG introduces the three metafunctions in an order different from IFG, although both start with discussion on constituency. Whereas IFG presents in the order of textual, interpersonal, and experiential metafunctions, Thompson chooses to start with clause as exchange, which is followed by clause as representation, leaving the discussion on clause as message towards the end of his textbook. Such an order turns out to be more practical than that set in IFG as past and current students of AEG expressed to the author. The reason is simple: the interpersonal labels like Subject and Complement sound more familiar because, like many ESL learners in other countries, those in Hong Kong are taught such terms in their secondary school, and most ESL textbooks available in the market also introduce these terms, despite the fact that SFL has offered new functional definitions to these terms. Those students of the author said that if the course had started with textual metafunction, they would have found it even more difficult to learn SFL. This reflects that, the 14 week schedule of AEG, which follows the order of the chapters in IngFG, is an appropriate design.

### Problems: Progress, Learning, Assignments

Generally speaking, the first cohort of students of AEG found SFL challenging. This is reflected not only from the focus group interview (see below), but also from questions and response raised during and after class. The first seven weeks of lessons fell behind schedule severely due to the need to go through concepts of constituency, logical dependency, and most importantly, the interpersonal metafunction. In particular, students found it confusing when they did constituent analysis they still used the label ‘Object’, but then when dealing with interpersonal labels they had to use ‘Complement’ instead. The definition of ‘Subject’, that it is the entity the speaker wants to hold responsible for the validity of the proposition made in a clause, also sounded too new to be easily comprehensible to them, even though that of ‘Finite’, ‘Adjunct’, ‘mood types’, and ‘speech roles’ took them relatively shorter time to understand. In contrast, the experiential metafunction made its way through relatively smoothly, probably due to two reasons. First, students had been prepared for unlearning old concepts acquired in secondary school as well as grammar textbooks, and for learning new concepts. Second, the semantic relationship among ‘process’, ‘participant’, ‘circumstance’, ‘range’, and ‘beneficiary’ is a rather universal linguistic phenomenon and was thus more easily received. Despite this, not much time was left for the three remaining topics (textual metafunction, logical metafunction, and grammatical metaphor). Since clause as message mainly deals with Theme and integrates the concepts of interpersonal and experiential metafunctions, which students already learned, lessons went on at a rather fast pace. In the last make-up lesson, students were taught logical dependency relations, logico-semantic relations, as well as grammatical metaphor. The learning efficiency, as can be imagined, was low.

### Assessments and Students’ Performance

With a view to students’ reactions and responses in class, the two take-home assignments simply required them to do interpersonal and experiential labeling, respectively, of an excerpt of news article of their own choice. Since labeling is relatively straightforward, students generally obtained high scores. For the same reason, the mid-term test (on the interpersonal metafunction and material and mental processes of the experiential metafunction) and a quiz of the textual metafunction near the end of term were mainly about labeling constituents, and the overall performance was great. As for the final examination, students were assessed on their knowledge of all three metafunctions as well as the logical metafunction. Naturally, they scored lower (around 10 marks) than they did in their coursework assessments. There were a few fails, indicating, other factors being equal, a lack of mastery of fundamental concepts required for the subject. Having said all these, the present study does not represent any accurate quantitative or qualitative analysis of students’ learning (see the section of “Limitations” below), and students’ good performance in the assessments may not necessarily correlate to their knowledge of SFG. Certainly, however, a very low score (e.g. <50/100) is telling of poor knowledge.

### Focus Group Interview

For a better understanding of how students, the major stakeholder of AEG, perceive the subject as well as SFG in general, a focus group interview was conducted, with the permission from the Director of Hong Kong Community College, PolyU. Written consents have also been obtained from all interviewees, who took AEG in the academic year of 2012-2013 and who remain anonymous in this paper, for presentation of the summary of the interview below.

### Summary of Focus Group Interview

All participants agree that it was the first time they learnt about concepts in SFL. Many terms were brand new to them. Due to the tight teaching schedule, some concepts, especially those under the interpersonal metafunction, were not

covered. This resulted in gap in knowledge when students worked on text analysis for their assignment. Interviewees generally agreed that it would be good if the subject could be split into two courses, namely AEG1 and AEG2, to be offered in two consecutive semesters. But there were worries how the split could fit in the two-year AD curriculum. In fact, the interviewer shared the same worries.

The opinions on the usefulness of AEG to other linguistics subjects were mixed. It was reported that the sharing of some terms between SFL and traditional linguistics sometimes created confusion. However, there was experience that the functional approach adopted by SFL facilitated understanding concepts, those of constituency in particular, in traditional linguistics subjects.

All interviewees agreed SFL as a distinct discipline should be included in the curriculum for sub-degree programs which prepare students for articulation into language-related degree programs. As an introduction to SFL, AEG provides a foundation, on which interested students can develop further in their future studies. One interviewee even opined that in the pursuit of knowledge in general, SFL is an interesting area to explore.

The specific concepts in SFL framework based on IFG2 and Thompson's Introducing Functional Grammar which interviewees found useful include modality, Theme-Rheme, Subject-Finite, and process types. These are some examples provided by SFL that are not taught in secondary school, of which the English curriculum mainly focuses on the four general skills, namely listening, speaking, writing and reading. It was agreed that SFL facilitates understanding of English as a second language. One interviewee also pointed out that SFL allows better control of English when doing Chinese-to-English translation.

In conclusion, from the viewpoint of the interviewees, the most important stakeholders – students, especially those studying language-related programs, should study SFL, at least at an introductory level.

## LIMITATIONS

The analysis of performance of the 2012/13 cohort is subject to, in addition to those mentioned above, a number of variables, including delivery of course materials, backgrounds of students and assessment methods. First, it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the effectiveness of lectures and tutorials in transferring SFL knowledge from the teacher to the students, although indirect evidence such as students' response right on spot, questions raised by students, and comments provided by students to the teacher, may shed some light qualitatively. Second, the students came from diverse academic, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, some were obviously more competent in English, while some others demonstrated better intellectual readiness for linguistics. Such qualities definitely predisposed students to better performance in the course. Finally, the assessment methods of the course may also contribute to variations in students' results. When doing their coursework assignments, students may consult each other and the teacher. Some may even seek help from other sources. These extra efforts, in addition to in-class learning, would normally result in better scores. Students' performance at the final examination, needless to say, may be affected by various factors, such as students' physical and mental conditions, students' examination skills and time management skills, the physical settings of the examination venue, and the nature, appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

SFG as a powerful tool for discourse analysis is a subject crucial to the curriculum of any academic programs

related to language studies. At which stage of learning it should be introduced, how and how much of it should be taught and learned, and how learning of it should be assessed pose as a challenge to educators. This paper might shed some lights on the answers to these questions. Having been given the opportunity to teach AEG the second time in the academic year of 2013-2014, the author has revised the teaching schedule to make room for a more comprehensive coverage of important concepts of SFG. Hopefully, more positive results will be obtained from both assessments as well as students' feedback.

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